

An Administrative Survey of the Masai Social System

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of plains, with inhabitants ranging from the purest of Bantu, through various Hamitic strains to the Nilo-Hamitic Masai. 114

Lest my interest in and affection for the Masai may label me in the minds of my readers as an exponent of the theory that the so-called unspoilt primitive tribes should be preserved as museum specimens, I would here state my belief that, for survival, any culture must adapt itself to its environment: and environment includes not only the physical, but the political, social and economic forces with which such culture finds itself in contact.

There are numerous features in the Masai mode of life which, relative to these external forces, can only be regarded as undesirable. On the physical side one frequently hears cited the unhygienic state of life in the bomas and the high incidence of venereal disease brought about, it is alleged, by the social system. But is life any more hygienic in the slums of great cities in Europe and America? 105
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On the political side there is much talk of broadening the basis of Native Administrations, of greater democratic representation in the local government machine. How do the Masai compare with their neighbours to this respect? It has been written of Kenya — and within my knowledge it applies to certain areas of Tanganyika, — that "In districts where hereditary chiefs were unknown the Government-appointed chief or the chief elected without secret ballot from a short list of men presented to the people, very often now possesses wealth, lands and power." But this is obviously no new tendency in African social development: it is significant that in two cases the word for "Chief" in one dialect of a language group means "rich man" in a neighbouring dialect. (Lo-keria in Masai means a rich man, in Arusha, a chief; *maungati* in Irangi means a rich man, in Mbugwe a chief). This political nest-feathering is, however, a tendency not to be found in Masailand; the *laibons* by their magico-religious position have waxed and grown fat on the gifts of their followers, but the chosen representatives of the people, the *laigwanak*, never. Once a departure was made from the original misconception that the *laibon* was a type of chief, the Native Administration of the Masai was set on a truly broad-based democratic foundation of African, not European, conception. Of how many neighbouring tribes can the same be said? [CC1]•

On the economic side the Masai are frequently alleged to maintain large herds of useless cattle, but to one who has watched the process develop over the last 14 years, the growth of the livestock marketing system and the conception of the economic value of cattle is not the least remarkable feature of Masai development. Is this conception growing at an equal rate amongst neighbouring tribes? Over the last decade has any African tribe exported a greater number of cattle than the Masai, without at the same time exporting the stored fertility of its land?

It is fair criticism of Masai pastoralism that much forest has been burnt out and many waters trampled. But the well-managed grass land which replaced the forest at least preserves soil stability, as contrasted with forest cut by agricultural tribes who expose the soil to erosion; and the trampled out waters can be restored by suitable conservation